

Coping with Young Children's Beliefs About Adults

Developed by

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The beliefs that young children - the 6-and-under set usually, but they can be older - have about adults can and do interfere with getting accurate, reliable information from them. In a nutshell, those beliefs are:

1. Adults tend to know what they themselves know.
(Understandable in many cases, when children have told more than one person about an event. The knowledge is out there, so surely you must have it too...)
2. Children usually believe that adults:
 - are right. (Parents know everything...for a while.)
 - are sincere. (Sarcasm, irony, wryness escape them.)
 - wouldn't trick them. (Children don't expect adults to lie to them, put false words in their mouths, or twist meaning. Even if they recognize that something is wrong with what an adult says, they rarely have the linguistic, cognitive, or conversational tools to fix it.)

Coping with these beliefs is impossible unless adults realize that they exist. Three ways to help children to help you overcome the problem are to use the following statements when you interview children. These statements are useful with all children, ages 2 ½ to 18 year olds.

Three Useful Statements in Interviewing Children

1. I wasn't there, so... (fill in the blank appropriately for your situation).
2. Even if you think I know, tell me anyway.
3. Even if you think it doesn't matter, tell me anyway.
(It is not children's job to know what kind of details you need. What is salient to them may not matter to you, but what is perfectly usual and normal for them may not be worth mentioning as far as they are concerned. It is vital that you let them know what kinds of details you are interested in.)
Examples:
I wonder what color that room was? (given that a room has been mentioned)
Where was Mom?
What did you have on?...

The task of interviewing children is a formidable one, and whatever we can do to understand how and what children think can only help us to get information that it is as accurate as possible.